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How Situational Factors at the Workplace Affect Work Engagement among Public Administrators: A mediation moderated framework

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Abstract

Situational factors at work may influence work engagement among employees. With 169 respondents from public administrators in the Johor Bahru Tengah Municipal Council, Malaysia, the findings were derived. The survey data from respondents were analysed using hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Findings showed that ambiguity and imbalance impaired work engagement. Meanwhile, distributive fairness significantly influences work engagement directly and indirectly. The results suggest that the influence of an ambiguous situation at work decreased work engagement, but can be improved, mainly through distributive fairness. Distributive fairness also moderated the linkage between ambiguous situational at work and work engagement.

Keywords: Work engagement, Public administrators, Situational factors, Ambiguity, Imbalance, Distributive fairness

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1.0 Introduction

Working as public administrators in a municipal council exposes workers to all situational factors that may hinder or increase work engagement. Work engagement is persistent and a pervasive affective-cognitive state that is not focused on any particular object, event, individual or behavior (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, p. 295). Work engagement is important among public administrators as they encourage employees to work hard voluntarily and willing to invest more effort in delivering better service to others. Studies done among Israeli public managers and employees showed that work engagement among them is high. Those who are engaged in their work are expected to cognitively and physically perform (Kahn & Heaphy, 2014). Furthermore, public administrator roles are similar to all other public servant roles where they wish to do good for others and are committed to the public interest (Bakker, 2015). Borrowing from the theory of public service motivation (Perry, 1997), public administrators' characters and motives differ from other occupational groups, where the basic principle is public service and employees are obliged to serve the public well.

Despite theories already proving that work engagement affects many significant consequences on employees in organizations at large, studies that focus on factors affecting work engagement among public administrators are still scarce. Lu and Guy (2014) focused on the antecedents of public servants' work engagement in China, in which to the best of the authors' knowledge remains the only study found on the area of study. Thus, the present study attempts to relate work engagement among public administrators with a few potential antecedents. The study contributes to the body of knowledge in several ways. Firstly, most previous studies focused on other occupational groups such as teachers (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006) and nurses (García-Sierra, Fernández-Castro & Martínez-Zaragoza, 2016). Secondly, we introduced a new concept in measuring a public administrator's performance. Instead of highlighting job satisfaction or job commitment, work engagement is a distinct construct that differs from others, and it is essential to be measured as the effect on several employees' positive behaviours and organisational outcomes. (Vigoda-Gadot, Eldor & Schohat, 2013).

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The antecedents of work engagement, in general, can be explained from the occupational stress models. The present study used the job demand resource model (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001) as a base model. The basic assumption of this model is that different occupational groups possess unique characteristics. Generally, the researcher categorized these factors into situational factors and individual factors (Crawford, LePine & Rich, 2010). Situational factors can be categorized into two, namely job demands and job resources. It hypothesized that job demands (i.e. ambiguity, imbalance) are likely to have resulted in several strained outcomes and may hinder organizational goals. This includes an increase in burnout and a reduction in work engagement, whereas job resources (i.e. distributive fairness) support positive organizational and employee's outcomes (Taipale, Selander, Anttila & Nätti, 2011). But less studies focused on the influence of job demands on work engagement, except in the study by (Prieto, Soria, Martínez & Schaufeli, 2008). In the present study, we focused more on job demands where we use ambiguity and imbalance to represent job demands and distributive fairness to define job resources for public administrators.

Ambiguity is often referred to as an ambiguous situation with regards to the rewards, promotions and appointments. For example, studies conducted by (Lloyd, King & Chenoweth, 2002) highlighted that the expected job demand faced by human service work ambiguity. Meanwhile, according to the JD-R model, some job demands influence employees' well-being (work engagement and burnout) through a few potential job resources (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Consistent with this model ambiguity is expected to have a negative direct effect on distributive fairness that represents job resources for this specific occupational group (public administrator). H1: Ambiguity is negatively related to distributive justice.

Meanwhile, the imbalance between authority and responsibilities means that responsibilities and authority granted are not equally provided for supervisors (Kinnunen, Feldt & Mäkikangas, 2008; Siegrist, 1998). In other words, it means that public administrators do not have adequate authority to fulfil their tasks. Imbalance can be in terms of imbalance between rules and responsibilities and effort-reward imbalance, as posited by (Siegrist, 1996). Authorities in organization can be related to the lack of autonomy. When employees need to have responsibilities in many factors but are lacking in independence to make a decision, they are most likely to reduce work engagement. Mostly in public sectors, there exists a bureaucratic process. Thus, most of the employees require approval from at the top level of management before making a decision. Due to the rigidity of bureaucracy, employees will feel they have a lack of autonomy. Therefore, this reduces work engagement. H2: Imbalance is negatively related to work engagement.

It hypothesized that ambiguity is likely to impair the well-being of an employee, such as work engagement. Such feelings of uncertainty will may cause withdrawal behavior that leads to a reduction in work commitment (Bakker, Demerouti & Schaufeli, 2003). Ambiguity creates a feeling that will hinder work engagement among employees. For example, employees who perceive their effort as worthless and there is no guarantee in getting rewards on the effort they have put in will make them withdraw their efforts and disengage with their work. Furthermore, work engagement has been mentioned to share a similar purpose with motivational concepts. H3: Ambiguity is negatively related to work engagement. If an employee believes that the distribution of resources is fair and justice, the perception of fairness may affect work engagement (Strom, Sears & Kelly, 2014). To support this assumption, it may refer to the social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and conservation resource theory (COR) (Hobfoll, 1989), as employees that feel they perceive fairness are experiencing positive experiences. This will eventually accumulate and create a positive spiral of resources and affect work engagement in the organization. The distribution of fairness role as mediators has been discussed through the social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964), where the fairer the opinion regarding distributive fairness in the organization, the stronger the influence in overcoming the effect of job demands, thus enhancing work engagement among employees. For instance, studies conducted among public servants in India provided evidence on how perceived fairness has a link with work engagement (Biswas, Varma & Ramaswami, 2013). Distributive justice is considered to be one of the potential job resources among public administrators (Ghosh, Rai & Sinha, 2014) that is likely in affecting the level of work engagement. Studies on innovative work behavior among pharmaceutical employees in Indonesia also provided evidence on the moderating effect brought by distributive fairness on conflict and turnover (Shih & Susanto, 2011). We expect a similar mechanism applied to ambiguous and work engagement linkage. Therefore, below is the hypothesis that was formulated: H4: Distributive fairness is positively related to work engagement, H5: Distributive fairness mediates the relationship between ambiguity and work engagement and H6: Distributive fairness moderates the relationship between ambiguity and work engagement.

2.0 Method

The survey was completed by 169 public administrators at the Johor Bahru Tengah Municipal Council, Malaysia. One hundred seventy questionnaires were distributed, and we managed to collect 169 respondents (99.4% response rate). Out of 169 of public administrators, 55.0% are male and 45.0% are female (SD = .49). Their mean age was 30 years old (SD = 1.65) in 2017. 53.8% were married while 43.8% were still single, with 2.4% categorised as others (SD = .55). Average of the respondents' education background was diploma holders (40.8%) (SD = 1.05) and their mean working experience was 4.4 years (SD = .71).

This questionnaire was also translated with back to back translation (Brislin, 1986). Work engagement ($\alpha = .80$) was measured by using the five-item scale from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-romá & Bakker, 2002). The scale ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A sample of a question is "I feel strong and vigorous in my job". The next variable ambiguity ($\alpha = .86$) was measured by using a four-item scale (Isiktaş, 2014). The scale ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. A sample of a question is "I have a clear prediction on where I will be regarding my job position". Imbalance ($\alpha = .84$) was measured by using a four-item scale (Isiktaş, 2014). The scale ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Example of a question is "I have too many responsibilities in my job compared to my authority emanating from laws". Lastly, Distributive

fairness ($\alpha = .79$) was measured by using a four-item scale from distributive justice (Colquitt, 2001). The scale ranged from (1) Never to (5) Always. Example of a question is "Do those outcomes reflect the effort you have put into your work?"

We used the IBM SPSS Statistics (SPSS) software package to see the inter-correlations between variables. Harman's single factor test was conducted through the exploratory factor analysis (EFA) in SPSS to assess the common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). These data were free from the common method variance as the variance explained by a single factor at 12.87% was less than 50%. We confirmed the measurement model using the AMOS software through the five absolute fit indices: χ^2 goodness-of-fit statistics; the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI); the Tucker–Lewis Fit Index (TLI); the Comparative Fit Index (CFI); and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA). Acceptable values for GFI, TLI and CFI are those above 0.90, while, for the RMSEA, an acceptable value is one that is smaller than 0.08 (Byrne, 2001). Through CFA, we verified the reliability of the four variables tested: work engagement, ambiguity, imbalance and distributive fairness where $\chi^2 = 192.69$, GFI = 0.90, TLI = 0.92 and CFI = 0.94 and RMSEA = 0.07. Then, we used a standard hierarchical multiple regression analysis to examine the main and interaction effect proposed in each hypothesis, as recommended by (Cohen, 1983). To test our mediation hypothesis, we employed steps from (Baron & Kenny, 1986). To test for the indirect effect, we used the Monte Carlo Simulation with the R open-source program (Selig & Preacher, 2008). With the confidence interval (CI) value of 95, not including zero, this indicates a statistical significance.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents the mean scores, standard deviations and correlations between the study variables.

Table 1: Means (M), Standard Deviations (SD) and Inter-Correlations between Study Variables

	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Work Engagement	3.64	0.34	-			
2. Ambiguity	2.28	0.6	-.29***			
3. Imbalance	3.12	0.65	-.08+	-0.06		
4. Distributive Fairness	4.01	0.6	-.33***	.28***	0.11	-
N= 169, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001						

In hypothesis 1, we predicted that ambiguity relates to distributive fairness. We found that ambiguity is negatively related to distributive fairness. ($\beta = -.27$, SE = .07, $p < .001$; see Table 2). In hypothesis 2, we predicted that imbalance relates to work engagement. Results showed that hypothesis 2 was supported with the values for the imbalance ($\beta = .07$, SE = .04, $p < .05$; see Table 3). Hypothesis 3 predicted that ambiguity is related to work engagement. Our findings indicated that H3 was supported with the values of ambiguity ($\beta = .16$, SE = .04, $p < .001$; see Table 2). Hypothesis 4 predicted that distributive fairness is positively related to work engagement. As expected, distributive fairness was found to be significantly related to work engagement ($\beta = .12$, SE = .04, $p < .001$; see Table 2). In hypothesis 5, we predicted change distributive fairness would mediate the relationship between ambiguity and work engagement. Our findings showed that the indirect effect was significant, in other words, distributive fairness mediates the relationship between ambiguity and work engagement. 95% CI [-.06, -.01], Therefore, hypothesis 5 was supported. In relation to hypothesis 6, we predicted that distributive fairness would moderate the relationship between ambiguity and work engagement. As expected, the hypothesis was supported where the buffering effect is significant. The buffering effect values are as follow; $\beta = .07$, SE = .03, $p < .05$ (see Table 2)

Table 2: Hierarchical regression analysis predicting work engagement

Step	Work Engagement				
	1	2	3	4	5
Age	.05(.01)**				
Ambiguity			-.12(.04)**	-.15(.04)**	-.16(.04)***
Imbalance					-.07(.04)*
Distributive Fairness		.18(.04)***	.15(.04)***	.11(.04)*	.12(.04)**
Ambiguity				.06(.02)*	.07(.03)*
X Distributive Fairness					
R ²	.06***	.11***	.15***	.18***	.20***
ΔR^2	.06***	.05***	.04***	.03***	.02***

N= 169, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001.

The coefficients reported unstandardized regression weight. Significance of ΔR^2 tested with partial F-test in regression equations.

The job demand resource was used to frame the relationship between situational factors (ambiguity, imbalance and distributive fairness) and work engagement among public administrators. The results showed that ambiguity, imbalance and distributive fairness

affect work engagement, specific call ambiguity which acts through distributive fairness. On the other hand, imbalance has a direct effect on work engagement. One possible explanation is that the influence of job demands on work engagement is less compared to job resources (Mauno, Kinnunen & Ruokolainen, 2007). Expectedly, distributive fairness buffers the effect of ambiguity on work engagement. With the existence of distributive fairness, it can increase the level of work engagement although the employees work in an ambiguous work environment. Work engagement is commonly used in the job - demand resource model to exhibit the link between job demand and resource on an employee's well-being (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Schaufeli, Bakker & Van Rhenen, 2009). Our findings on impairment on work engagement due to job demand such ambiguity and imbalance is valuable as most models on public administrators focused on motivation (Vigoda-Gadot et al., 2013) without recognizing the strains that may affect these government administrators' engagement at work. This study provides support as job demands such as ambiguity and imbalance are negatively related to work engagement, and this relationship is being mediated by job resources such as distributive fairness.

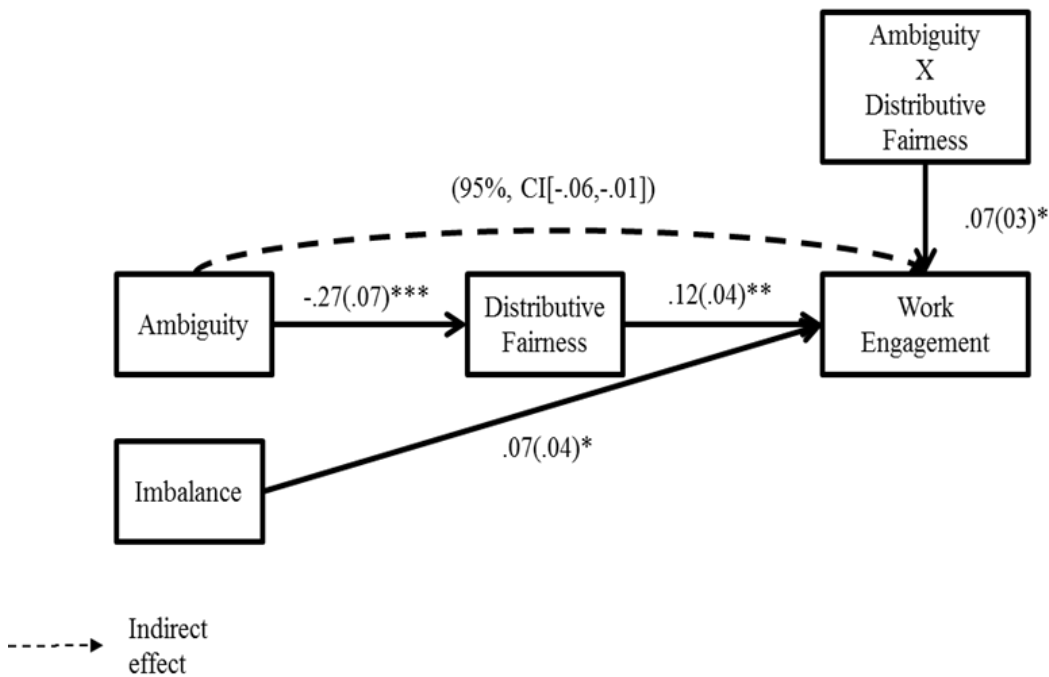


Fig 1: Results

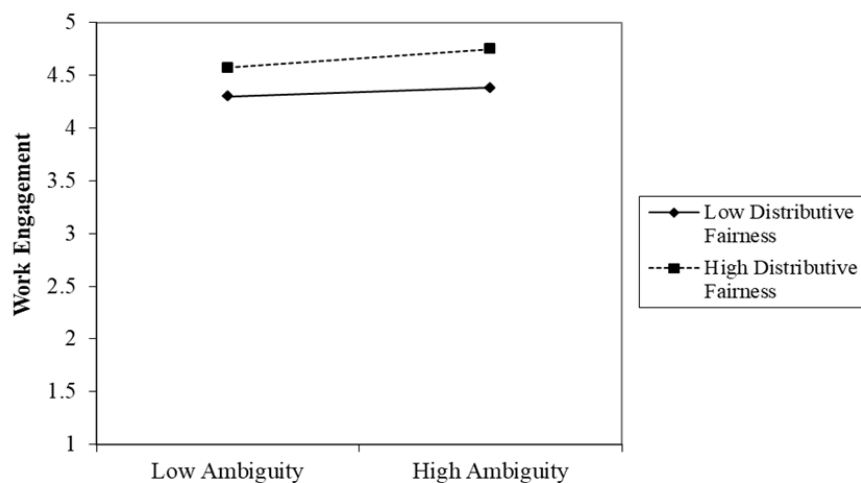


Fig 2: Moderating role of distributive fairness

As previous studies suggested, the relationship between distributive fairness and work engagement can be mediated and moderated. (Gillet, Fouquereau, Bonnaud-Antignac, Mokoukolo & Colombat, 2013; Shih & Susanto, 2011). Previous studies also highlighted the mediating roles of justice in between job demand and work engagement such as one in a study in Japan This is due to not yet having found the proof of mediation between procedural and interactional linkage between job demands and work engagement (Inoue et al., 2009). Hence, this study provided support as distributive justice acts as the mediator between job demands and work engagement.

One limitation in interpreting the study was the use of cross-sectional design limiting the causal inferences in using the data. A longitudinal study is necessary to explain the causal effect in future studies.

4.0 Conclusion

It is interesting to note that some job demands have differences in the influences on work engagement. For example, ambiguity at the workplace affects work engagement but can be weakened by the existence of distributive justice. Imbalance, on the other hand, has a direct impact on work engagement where this negative effect is not affected by other contingencies. It indicates the importance of practicing distributive justice at the workplace as high levels of distributive justice positively influence a public administrator's work engagement. This is to deplete the strain effect of job demand such ambiguity.

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